

Please share your stories about how Open Access to this article benefits you.

The Theatre Historian as Rock Star, or Six Axioms for a New Theatre History

by Henry Bial

2007

This is the published version of the article, made available with the permission of the publisher. The original published version can be found at the link below.

Henry Bial. (2007). The Theatre Historian as Rock Star, or Six Axioms for a New Theatre History Text. *Theatre Topics* 17(1):81-86.

Published version: <http://www.dx.doi.org/10.1353/tt.2007.0002>

Terms of Use: <http://www2.ku.edu/~scholar/docs/license.shtml>



PROJECT MUSE®

The Theatre Historian as Rock Star, or Six Axioms for a New Theatre History Text

Henry Bial

Theatre Topics, Volume 17, Number 1, March 2007, pp. 81-86 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tt.2007.0002



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tt/summary/v017/17.1bial.html>

The Theatre Historian as Rock Star, *or* Six Axioms for a New Theatre History Text

Henry Bial

History is over.

Not in a richly layered Hegel *cum* Baudrillard *cum* Francis Fukayama “end-of-history” way. Not in a Benjamin / Kushner / Millenarian “end-of-days” way. Not even in a Phelan / McKenzie / Jackson “end-of-performance” way. History is over, rather, in the way that grunge rock, independent bookstores, and *Late Night with David Letterman* are. History is “so last century.” Most of our students see neither the need for nor the appeal of history. They begrudgingly accept a semester or two as the cost of admission to more immediately amusing or lucrative pursuits. They regard the fact that we scholars continue to practice it anyway as a function of faith, inertia, and indescribable geekiness. You might have noticed that theatre, too, has this problem. Twice damned, then, the theatre historian: the most abject apostle of an already abject faith.

As a matter of intellectual and economic survival, we must at all levels of theatre history pedagogy focus on the active role of the theatre historian as interlocutor, as storyteller, as academic, and (in a limited but real sense) as celebrity. If we are to inspire and properly prepare future theatre historians, we must teach students how and why theatre history is written, and what intellectual, historical, political, and professional concerns influence that writing. In this spirit, I offer the following Six Axioms for a New Theatre History Text.

1. Summon the Authorial Presence

In traditional undergraduate (and often graduate) pedagogy, the role of the theatre historian is strictly proscribed: it’s not about you—stay out of the way of the story. Most undergraduate theatre history students could not name a single theatre historian, with the (possible) exceptions of their professor and the author of their textbook. Theatre history, as too often taught, is something to be experienced passively: read, understood, and appreciated. But it’s not something that people *do*.

If we want more students to value, celebrate, and perform theatre history, we might begin by teaching them that it is a dynamic and creative enterprise in its own right. It is, moreover, a *scene*, complete with disputes, alliances, crises, opportunities, trends, classics, and yes, stars. There was a time, or perhaps we only imagined it, when concerns about reputation, careerism, and “star” status were considered an unfortunate and somewhat *déclassé* symptom of a general decline in academic culture. But when history is over, the aura of the chronicler is crucial to the reception of the chronicle. We are now conditioned to expect “personal” details about our journalists, entertainers, and politicians. We don’t want just information—facts are cheap, plentiful, and promiscuous—we want a relationship with someone we trust . . . or failing that, someone famous.

In a culture that worships celebrity, our discipline cannot afford to ignore the reality that some of us are or desire to be, if not famous, then not not famous. We must further recognize that to our students, the desire for celebrity is not a perversion of our profession, but the most recognizable thing about it. It’s time for the theatre historian as rock star to step up to the mic.

The textbook is not the only site on which we can mount this performance. Primary documents, dramaturgical intervention, and professors' management of their own classroom *personae* all play a role. Nevertheless the text is most students' first encounter with the professional output of the theatre historian, and it is the largest and most substantial *objet* that they take from the class. Because the necessity of choosing some reading cannot be deferred beyond a certain point, the choice of a text may be the only serious conversation about the theatre history curriculum at a given institution in a given year. Conversely, at many institutions the text stays with the course longer than any individual faculty member.

At the same time, the influence of critical theory and performance studies has taught us to challenge traditional notions of authorship, authority, and text. We, in turn, challenge our students to problematize, historicize, and critique the dramatic text. Yet we rarely apply those same techniques to the secondary sources in our curriculum, either explicitly or in the way we deploy textbooks, anthologies, and other readings. Perhaps this is because the conventional lecture-machine approach to the subject depends on the professor's aura of perfect knowledge, on *the subject supposed to know*.

The New Theatre History Text must not allow the theatre historian to remain hidden behind the veil of scholarly convention. The "just the facts" approach that characterizes the norm of most textbooks must be exposed as arbitrary convention, with no more ontological reality than theatrical realism. On the stage, as Marvin Carlson has argued in *The Haunted Stage* (2002), a performer's celebrity permeates conventional realistic boundaries, breaking the fourth wall by pointing outward from the text being performed to other texts and contexts in which the actor has performed. The actor's distinctive vocal and physical presence in this play invokes the memory of other plays, of other public performances, of personal interactions. So too must our Text be haunted, pointing outward, invoking other associations. Where, if at all, does the Author teach? In what discipline was the Author trained? What is the Author like in real life? The theatre historian as rock star must be prepared to tour.

2. Authorship Should be Multiple and Contradictory

The unified authorial voice is the unmarked voice. The unmarked voice is the uncontested voice. By the time one completes graduate training, one can perhaps identify methodological and stylistic traits that distinguish, say, Brockett from, say, Case (or Garber from Greenblatt, Dolan from Schechner). But even in the context of a single course, it is essential that we provide our students with comparative models, multiple voices. We would not teach a course on modern drama that included only the plays of Brecht, so why would we choose a textbook that includes only the scholarship of Bentley? Our Text therefore will include the work of multiple scholars, and their distinctive voices should not be forced to conform to a unified style. The disparity in method or tone reminds students that there is more than one way to tell this story (and more than one story to be told), forcing them to choose which voice speaks to them most clearly. Moreover, the chronological / geographic / thematic "coverage" provided by various authors should overlap so that points of convergence, disagreement, and misrecognition are brought to the foreground.

Theatre Histories: An Introduction (2006) by Phillip B. Zarrilli, Bruce A. McConachie, Gary Jay Williams, and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei represents an important step down this road. This laudable volume invokes multiplicity in its very title. Organized around *epistemes*—big ideas that characterize eras—this text more than any before illustrates the interdependence between the history of the theatre and the history of the world at large. Especially praiseworthy is the chronological overlap, the resistance to the strictures of a linear timeline. Professors Zarrilli, McConachie, Williams, and Sorgenfrei, however, demonstrate multiplicity only as consensus and coalition rather than as conflict and contradiction. Only occasionally is individual authorship claimed, and style and tone are remarkably consistent throughout. This represents a frankly remarkable literary achievement, but

when history is over, does it produce the necessary drama? The desired individuation of character? Where characters are in conflict, the theatre lives; where scholars are in conflict, theatre history lives. The theatre historian as rock star is not a solo act, and desires cacophony as much as harmony.

3. We Must Have Footnotes¹

In the media marketplace, citation contributes to celebrity (cf. Brad and Angelina); in academe, citation performatively enacts celebrity (cf. Judith Butler). Histories and theories move up and down the charts.² The theatre historian as rock star reads the index and bibliography *first*. Citations unperformed fall out of the repertoire. *Excuse me, didn't you used to be Jan Kott?* Citations re-cited define the community. "We shall know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies."³ A shout out to the peeps isn't just good manners, it's how the discourse becomes a discipline.

Simultaneously, the footnoted citation makes manifest the process by which theatre history is written. It is the scholarly work's memory, providing clues to its back-story, its subtext.⁴ The footnote tells us if and how far we can trust our interlocutor.⁵ As individuals we are, one might say, neither more nor less than the sum of our experiences; we establish or maintain our identities through memory. This is indeed an important function of theatre itself.⁶ Like exposition, the footnote *remembers*, and in so doing, *identifies*. It is valuable not simply because it demonstrates the author's

1. Sent: Wed, 11 Oct 2006 12:26 PM

Subject: *Theatre Topics* Formatting Question

To: [Johns Hopkins University Press production department and *Theatre Topics* managing editor]—One of the pieces that will be in the March issue of TT uses footnotes. The author focuses on rethinking theatre history textbooks and includes a section titled "We Must Have Footnotes." Thus the idea of the footnote is central to the author's argument. However, it is TT's policy to use endnotes and not footnotes. Would you agree that for illustrative purposes, we can make an exception for this one section only?

2. See, for example, Lowell L. Hargens, "Citation Counts and Social Comparisons: Scientists' Use and Evaluation of Citation Index Data," *Social Science Research* 19:3 (September 1990): 205.

3. Victor Turner, as quoted in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, eds., *By Means of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 1, as cited in Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002) 13.

4. This essay, for example, was originally created for the 2005 ASTR working group on "Teaching of Theatre History and Historiography" convened by Jane Barnette, Melissa Gibson, and David Escoffery. The author extends thanks to the conveners and seminar participants.

5. Sent: Wed, 11 Oct 2006 1:24 PM

Subject: Re: *Theatre Topics* Formatting Question

To: Editor—Regarding your question, I would be inclined to answer no, for these reasons: the typesetter (JHUP) has an established design template for the journal, which would have to be altered; and my second concern is that future authors might ask for the same. Having said as such, I'll go along with whatever you and JHUP decide.

6. See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); and others.

identity as a scholar—which it does⁷—or because it is interesting—sometimes it isn't. The footnote is valuable first and foremost because it is history's memory, how we remember and therefore define what, where, when, how, and most importantly, *why* theatre scholarship happens.

When history is over, *provenance* is all.⁸

Publishers say that readers don't like footnotes because they are distracting.⁹ Distracting? *Demanding*. Ease of reading is a laudable goal if our purpose is to convey information, but it tends to diminish the experience.¹⁰ Consider again the lessons of the stage. Necessary information must be clear and simple: *The ambassadors from Norway, my good lord, are joyfully return'd*. Material for productive contemplation cannot be: *What a piece of work is man. . .* Our Text must balance the simple with the complex, the agreed-upon with the contested. When an idea arrives upon the stage, it must come to terms with its history and complications, not hide from them. When we provide our students with footnotes, we provide opportunities for distraction and digression, but not randomly—these are the distractions and digressions of which theatre history is made.¹¹ Our footnotes provide, in short, an opportunity to learn.

4. Mind the Gap

The lure of theatre history is the lure of the unknown. Indeed, scholarship of all disciplines and methods is a process of discovery. We acknowledge the necessity of teaching students enough uncontested facts to enable them to formulate their own questions for discovery, as well as the need to keep our classrooms at a safe distance from the existential abyss. Nevertheless, our text must not present theatre history as a complete and unbroken narrative, a finished piece. The success of rock music is that it appears to be democratic; though there are many virtuosi, the dominant myth is of the ordinary kid with extraordinary desire, and the song heard on the radio can be covered, if not mastered, by relative neophytes. The "product" of theatre history as represented by a typical textbook is so incommensurate, so out of scale with anything that can be accomplished on the undergradu-

7. For the scholar, the footnote is also a medium of performance. We demonstrate that we have more to say on a topic, while simultaneously showing that we recognize this extra information may be extraneous to the point at issue. The footnote—like the stage direction—claims a curious status, important enough to appear in print, but not important enough for the main text. It also offers a venue for demonstrating the scholar's ability to make intellectual connections creatively. See, for example, Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Norton, 1989, ed. and trans. James Strachey) 38n18: "Cf. My remarks elsewhere [. . .] on the effect of swinging and railway travel."

8. Sent: Mon, 16 Oct 2006 2:22 PM

Subject: Re: *Theatre Topics* Formatting Question

To: Editor—How many footnotes are there? If it's not too many, the desktop department said they could make the shift; however, they suggested maybe inserting a blurb of explanation so that, as the managing editor said, everyone doesn't start asking for new formatting.

9. For a discussion of publishers and footnotes, see Marjorie Garber, *Academic Instincts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001) 39–42.

10. *Ibid.*, 99.

11. Sent: October 16, 2006 1:29 PM

Subject: FW: *Theatre Topics* Formatting Question

To: Author—Here is the response from our contact at JHUP. So, how many footnotes do you think you might want to use?

ate level as to present a psychological barrier to entry. If we are to demonstrate to our students that theatre history is an active, ongoing tradition, we must make clear that there are still opportunities to join the band.

Our New Theatre History Text must therefore include scholarship that is unsatisfactory, not in the sense that it lacks rigor or interest, but rather that it asks more questions than it can answer. The theatre historian who articulates an urgent desire to know, even (or especially) in the face of the *impossibility of knowing*, has a place in our Text. The presentation of perfect knowledge suits the consumer model of education, but discourages examination of the process. It is teaching history without historiography, eating a hamburger without understanding butchery. It may be more pleasurable, but it is other than educational.

This leads directly to the next axiom . . .

5. The Lure of the Blank Page

The highlighter is a poor tool for active learning, because it encourages passive acceptance of the material. The highlighter says, My only contribution to this conversation is to choose what parts of it I wish to remember. The highlighter says, Theatre history is a menu, and I shall choose which parts of it to consume. The highlighter says, Will this be on the test?

Books must be written in. The New Theatre History Text must provide sufficient white space to invite student commentary. We must have generous margins, dedicated space for students to place their words alongside those of the authors. We must have several blank pages at the end of the main text to remind students that theatre history begins, rather than ends, at the point in time where they enter the conversation.

Providing more Empty Space upon which students can stage their own theatre history will, of necessity, make our Text more expensive. Writing in the book will, in all likelihood, reduce its resale value. But the real value of our Text will be enhanced. The student will have greater opportunity to take ownership of the Text, to inhabit it, to explore it, and in so doing, to de-commodify it. The New Theatre History Text will resist being sold back at the end of the semester.

6. I'm a Theatre Historian and I Approved This Message

The professional activity of the theatre historian includes mechanisms for identifying the content of scholarly work with its creator, from the Author's Bio to the formal introduction of conference panelists. These conventions are not merely a matter of scholarly vanity, but a recognition that this information is relevant, even necessary, to the contextualization of the scholarship. So also must our Text acknowledge the circumstances of its production, including the degree to which its contents have been informed by its authors' educational and professional experience, their status within and without the academy, and their prior and forthcoming scholarship. Should the text be unwilling or unable to provide this information, we as instructors must strive to provide it for ourselves and our students. As theatre historians we must embrace our celebrity and that of our colleagues, and stop asking our students to do business with people who refuse to give their real name.

Henry Bial is assistant professor of theatre and film at the University of Kansas. He is the author of *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (U of Michigan P, 2005); editor of *The Performance Studies Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2003); and co-editor, with Carol Martin, of *Brecht Sourcebook* (Taylor & Francis, 2000).

Works Cited

Carlson, Marvin. *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2002.

Zarrilli, Phillip B., Bruce A. McConachie, Gary Jay Williams, and Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei. *Theatre Histories: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2006.